

# Celebrating 10 Years GARDEN & GUN

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# THE SLOW LANE

For NASCAR champion Jimmie Johnson and his wife, Chandra, enjoying downtime at their Charlotte home is the ultimate win *by* LOGAN WARD



Styling by Kendra May, flowers by John Lupton



**CODE RED**

Previous page: The Johnsons relax in their library, which is lacquered with more than twenty coats in a custom oxblood red. A piece by the iconic artist and Lexington, Virginia, native Cy Twombly hangs above the fireplace.

**SETTING A HIGH BAR**

This page, from top: Moonshine is a fitting nod to NASCAR's origins; wingbacks by Gio Ponti for Rome's Parco dei Principi Grand Hotel and a Serge Mouille light fixture anchor the living room. Opposite: North Carolina artist Damian Stamer's custom ceiling installation and a dogwood-inspired sconce in the dining room.



BACK IN 2002, WHEN CHANDRA AND Jimmie Johnson first met, she was a model and he was a NASCAR Cup Series rookie bound for greatness. She lived in Manhattan. He lived on Lake Norman, north of Charlotte, North Carolina, the burgeoning Hollywood of stock-car racing. You can picture it: wall-sized plasma television, huge sectional couch, fully stocked bar. Jimmie and his buddies buzzed the lake in his boat and raced motorized bar stools around his driveway. Two years later, Jimmie and Chandra tied the knot. "I moved from New York with my suitcase straight into his bachelor pad," Chandra recalls. "I put my stuff in the closet, and after about a month, I thought, 'We need a new house.'"

In some other model-meets-NASCAR-superstar story, this might be where the marital friction starts. Not this one. Chandra and Jimmie, who recently tied Dale Earnhardt and Richard Petty for most NASCAR Cup Series championships ever, have crafted a stereotype-defying life for themselves and their two young daughters, Evie and Lydia. They have evolved—together—into a thoughtful couple with a colorful home base in Charlotte.

The Johnsons' Queen City residence didn't come together overnight. A half dozen years ago, with Jimmie on a winning streak and plans for children in the works, the couple took a long, hard look at the home they'd bought, newly built with a pool and a guesthouse in leafy Foxcroft, just minutes from Uptown. "It wasn't a true reflection of how we wanted to live," Chandra says. "That's where Barrie came in."

To oversee the project, Chandra and Jimmie hired Perry Poole, an architect, and Barrie Benson, an interior designer and Foxcroft neighbor who made a splash with the redo of her family's low-slung midcentury gem. In that project, Benson found that well-placed traditional antiques helped balance the modernism.

Here she faced the opposite challenge. The Johnsons' house was filled with lots of grays and dark greens—"too heavy and serious for such a fun couple," says Benson, a smart, outgoing font of design knowledge. Her plan: Brighten the rooms, add color, and contrast the traditional architecture with sleek furnishings and contemporary art. "This is the South," Benson says. "We didn't want to turn the home into something crazy modern. We







wanted to make it more youthful.”

In Chandra, Benson found the ideal client—an involved collaborator with a great eye. The pair rolled up their sleeves and set about creating a home filled with art and furnishings with a personal connection. “Every single thing, down to a pen,” Chandravowed, “would be something we love.”

Chandra, who in 2015 opened a contemporary art space and bookshop called Southern Comfort (SOCO) Gallery, is especially close to their home’s art. A painting by the second-wave abstract expressionist Joan Mitchell hangs above the living room mantel. Other rooms display works by contemporary photographers and painters. The Durham, North Carolina, native Damian Stamer is a favorite. The Johnsons

commissioned him to paint an abstract treatment on their dining-room ceiling. “When you’re sitting at the table, it’s almost like you’re looking up through tree limbs,” Chandrasays.

Her penchant for collecting extends to eclectic furnishings, dominated by midcentury modern pieces by respected European designers. The living room alone offers a museum-quality twentieth-century showcase, with, among other things, a pair of wingbacks designed by Gio Ponti for Rome’s Parco dei Principi Grand Hotel, a red leather chest of drawers with brass pulls designed by Jacques Adnet, and a Serge Mouille light fixture suspended from the ceiling.

#### PEDIGREE PIECES

A Finn Juhl love seat, hand-painted de Gournay wallpaper, and monogrammed Leontine linens in the bedroom.

“I’m constantly researching and discovering new things,” Chandra says. “For me it started with the American midcentury—designers like Edward Wormley and T. H. Robsjohn-Gibbings, older Knoll furniture. Then I moved on to French and Swedish designers and makers. These people were so dedicated to their craft. Once I get obsessed with something, I’m all in.”

Jimmie shares his wife’s enthusiasm for artistry. He’s also a sucker for traditional anniversary gifts. When their eighth rolled around, he launched a search for something bronze. The hunt led him to a New York gallery, where he bought a Joel Shapiro sculpture, which now graces the foyer.

Although it’s filled with beautiful things, the Johnson home is functional, never fussy. “I wanted to be able to hang children’s artwork on the walls and not have it look out of place,” Chandra says. “It’s important for me and Jimmie and our daughters to feel comfortable sitting and lounging and relaxing.”

Evie and Lydia love to make art at the family’s Robsjohn-Gibbings kitchen table while Chandra cooks. If scribble marks accidentally wind up on one of the matching chairs—which they do—so what? “I put our silver in the dishwasher,” Chandra says. “I know you’re not supposed to, but I do it! My two grandmothers only pulled their silver out on special occasions, but our girls eat breakfast with it. I say, let’s enjoy it instead of keeping it boxed up.”

Jimmie is drawn to the sanctuary their home provides. When he’s in town, he prefers hanging out with Chandra in the Red Room, so named because the paneled walls are lacquered in ox-blood red. He’ll make cocktails and spin vinyl from a growing collection of records originally inherited from Chandra’s father. “It’s our spot,” he says. You’ll often find Sturgill Simpson on the turntable, or the Black Keys. “If four daughters are in the room, we’ll throw on Adele. They love to sing those big ballads. I love our moments hanging in there.”

Chandra agrees. “Jimmie’s on the road thirty-eight weekends a year. When he’s not traveling, we enjoy being together.”

At home. **©**